

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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-----260229Z 118616 /41
P 251658Z MAR 77
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 2002

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FOR NEA/AND NEA/ARN ONLY

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGSZC PINT, SY, US
SUBJECT: VISIT OF REPRESENTATIVES OF US-SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY
TO SYRIA

1. STEPHEN SHALOM AND BERT CHABOT VISIT SYRIA MARCH 13-25, 1977. THEY CAME AS PROMINENT REPRESENTATIVES OF US-SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY TO REESTABLISH LINKS WITH JEWISH COMMUNITY IN SYRIA AND TO FACILITATE PROCESS OF "EMIGRATION" OF MARRIAGEABLE JEWISH WOMEN. THEY HAD EXTENSIVE CONTACTS WITH JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN DAMASCUS AND ALEPPO, AND SHALOM ALSO VISITED JEWISH COMMUNITY IN QAMISHLI, THE FIRST AMERICAN TO DO SO IN MANY YEARS. BOTH MEN WERE DEEPLY MOVED BY THEIR VISIT. THEY FOUND 400 SYRIAN JEWS LIVING IN QAMISHLI, 1400 IN ALEPPO (OF WHOM 350 ORIGINALLY FROM QAMISHLI) AND 3200-3500 IN DAMASCUS.

2. INITIAL MEETINGS WITH AMBASSADOR TOOK PLACE MORNING AFTER THEIR ARRIVAL AND INCLUDED FULL REVIEW OF CURRENT SITUATION AND WAYS TO FACILITATE TRAVEL OF GREATER NUMBERS OF SYRIAN JEWS TO US. THEY DECLINED EMBASSY'S
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ASSISTANCE IN ESTABLISHING CONTACT WITH COMMUNITY BUT REQUESTED EMBASSY ARRANGE FOREIGN MINISTRY MEETING. AT THEIR REQUEST, EMBASSY ALSO REPRODUCED FORMS ON WHICH THEY COULD REGISTER POTENTIAL JEWISH TRAVELERS TO U.S.

3. AT FAREWELL MEETING WITH AMBASSADOR, SHALOM REPORTED THAT THEY HAD HAD NO DIFFICULTY IN CONTACTING COMMUNITY

AND HAD BEEN SURPRISED AT OPENNES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN SPEAKING THEIR MINDS. HE SAID HE HAD FOUND COMMUNITY FRUSTRATED AND IN MANY CASES "DESPERATE" TO LEAVE SYRIA. EVEN WEALTHIER, WELL-ESTABLISHED FAMILIES WISHED TO LEAVE FOR SAKE OF THEIR CHILDREN, HE SAID. MANY, MANY UNMARRIED GIRLS ALSO WERE READY TO DEPART. COMMUNITY COUNCIL AND COUNCIL PRESIDENT TOUTAH HAD DESCRIBED TO THEM NATURE OF CURRENT TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS WHICH IN COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING MEANT THAT PASSPORTS WOULD NOT BE ISSUED TO UNMARRIED APPLICANTS OF EITHER SEX. THEY FOUND THAT TOUTAH WAS RESPECTED AS COMMUNITY LEADER AND ALTHOUGH SOME YOUNGER COMMUNITY MEMBERS WERE CRITICAL OF HIS CAUTIOUS APPROACH THEY WERE NOT READY TO BYPASS HIM IN COMMUNITY DEALINGS WITH THE SARG. TOUTAH HAD HAD NO OBJECTION TO SHALOM USING LIST WHICH HE HAD BROUGHT WITH HIM OF 130 NAMES OF UNMARRIED WOMEN IN COMMUNITY WHO MIGHT WISH TO VISIT US BUT HE HAD DECLINED TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR PREPARING ANY SORT OF LIST HIMSELF OR TO BECOMING INVOLVED IN ANY WAY IN CHOOSING WHO SHOULD APPLY TO TRAVEL NOW AND WHO SHOULD WAIT.

4. SHALOM DISCUSSED WITH AMBASSADOR CASE OF DR. MAYER BALAAS FOR WHOM HE HAD BROUGHT INVITATION TO INTERN AT CONEY ISLAND HOSPITAL. BALAAS HAD BEEN FIRST IN 1974 GRADUATING CLASS FROM DAMASCUS MEDICAL SCHOOL AND AS SUCH UNDER SYRIAN REGULATIONS HAD RIGHT TO TRAVEL ABROAD FOR SPECILIZATION. BALAAS HIMSELF ALSO VISITED EMBASSY AND SAID HE WILLING TO BE TEST CASE ALTHOUGH HE DID NOT HOLD OUT MUCH HOPE OF SUCCESS. CONSUL ADVISED BALAAS TO HAVE HOSPITAL SEND FORM DSP-66 TO EMBASSY THROUGH CONFIDENTIAL

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WASHINGTON ADDRESS SO HIS APPLICATION FOR US VISA COULD BE PROCESSED RAPIDLY AS SOON AS HE OBTAINED PASSPORT. COMMENT: UNFORTUNATELY, BALAAS IS NOT IDEAL TEST CASE. ONE OF THR3E YOUNG MEN WHO RECENTLY FLED SYRIA THROUGH TURKEY WAS HIS BROTHER. THIS COULD RAISE PRESUMPTION IN MIND OF SYRIAN AUTHORITIES THAT HE IS INTENDING EMIGRANT. IT IS LIKELY, HOWEVER, THAT HE WILL BECOME A PUBLICIZED CASE IF FORBIDDEN A PASSPORT. END COMMENT

5. EMBASSY ARRANGED FOR SHALOM AND CHABOT TO CALL ON FOREIGN MINISTRY DIRECTOR OF AMERICAN AFFAIRS SHOEFI. THEY REPORTED SHOEFI EXTREMELY FORTHCOMING TO POINT THAT HE EVEN SUGGESTED SENDING FALSE MARRIAGE PROPOSALS FROM US TO SUPPORT APPLICATIONS OF YOUNG WOMEN WISHING TO LEAVE. EMBASSY WARNED THEM THAT SHOEFI'S COMMENTS COULD NOT BE TAKEN AS OFFICIAL SARG POSITION., DESCRIBING HIM AS "SYRIAN DJILAS".

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ACTION SS-25

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2400

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 2002

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6. BEFORE DEPARTING FOR ALEPPO, SHALOM REQUESTED
AMBASSADOR TO ARRANGE FOR HIM AND CHABOT AND COMMUNITY
LEADER TOUTAH TO PAY CALL ON CHIEF OF STAFF SHIHABI.
PURPOSE HE SAID WAS TO BRIDGE GAP BETWEEN WHAT USG HAD
BEEN TOLD BY FOREIGN MINISTRY AND WHAT SYRIAN JEWISH
COMMUNITY UNDERSTOOD FROM MILITARY SECURITY OFFICIALS
REGARDING SPECIFICS OF NEW DECREE. AMBASSADOR REPLIED HE COULD
NOT ARRANGE THIS MEETING.

7. FOLLOWING RETURN FROM ALEPPO AND QAMISHLI, SHALOM
REQUESTED AMBASSADOR ARRANGE FOR HIM AND CHABOT TO PAY
COURTESY CALL ON PRESIDENT ASAD TO PRESENT RESPECTS AND
EXPRESS APPRECIATION FOR ALL THAT ASAD HAD DONE FOR SYRIAN
JEWISH COMMUNITY. AMBASSADOR AGREED TO SUPPORT THEIR
REQUEST AND DID SO IN MEMO TO PRESIDENT'S PRIVATE SECRETARY
REQUESTING AUDIENCE. AFTER REQUEST HAD BEEN MADE, SHALOM
ADVISED HE WAS THINKING OF TAKING TOUTAH ALONG TO MEETING
WITH PRESIDENT. EMBASSY STRONGLY DISCOURAGED THIS COURSE.
IN THE END, PRESIDENT WAS UNABLE TO SEE SHALOM AND CHABOT.
THEY DID HOWEVER CALL ON THEIR OWN INITIATIVE ON SEVERAL SECURITY
OFFICIALS WHO ARE COMMUNITY'S DESIGNATED LIAISON WITH SARG
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BEFORE LEAVING DAMASCUS AND DISCUSSED COMMUNITY RESTRICTIONS WITH THEM. EMBASSY DID NOT OBTAIN FULL READOUT ON THESE MEETINGS, BUT SHALOM REPORTED THAT ONE MEETING OPENED WITH SECURITY OFFICER VOLUNTEERING THAT STATUS OF THE UNMARRIED WOMEN WAS THE CENTRAL PROBLEM.

8.#SHALOM SAID THEY HAD SPENT GREAT DEAL OF TIME TRYING TO INSTILL SENSE OF COMMON RESPONSIBILITY IN ALLEPIAN AND DAMASCUS COMMUNITIES. IN ALEPPO, THEY HAD HELPED ORGANIZE COMMITTEES TO OVERSEE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY AFFAIRS. SHALOM NOTED WITH SOME AMAZEMENT THAT FUNDS WHICH HE AND HIS FATHER BEFORE HIM HAD SENT TO COMMUNITIES OVER THE YEARS VIA IRVING TRUST HAD ALWAYS GOTTEN THROUGH. HE SAID HE WAS CONCERNED, HOWEVER, ABOUT HOW TO ARRANGE MORE SUBSTANTIAL TRANSFERS TO BE USED FOR POSTING BONDS. HE THOUGHT HE WOULD BE RETURNING TO SYRIA IN 2-3 MONTHS.

9. CONCLUSIONS: A) SHALOM AND CHABOT WILL BE RIGHTFULLY REGARDED AS HAVING THE MOST DETAILED PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE ON CONDITIONS OF SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY. THEIR OWN SYRIAN ORIGINS GAVE THEM FULL ENTREE INTO ALL THREE COMMUNITIES AND THEY WERE ABLE TO MEET AND TALK WITH BROADER CROSS SECTION OF THESE COMMUNITIES THAN ANY OTHER VISITOR SO FAR. B) FROM THEIR CONVERSATIONS WITH US WE BELIEVE THEY HAVE GAINED SENSITIVITY TO SITUATION OF COMMUNITIES HERE. THEIR POLITICAL INSTINCTS APPEARED SOUND AND THEY APPEARED TO REALIZE THERE ARE LIMITATIONS ON WHAT CAN BE DONE AND HOW FAST IT CAN BE DONE. C) AFTER THEIR VISIT FEAR OF TRAVELLING TO SYRIA BY MEMBERS OF U.S. JEWISH COMMUNITY SHOULD BE COMPLETELY DISSIPATED. ALTHOUGH STOPPED AT SEVERAL ROAD BLOCKS FROM NORMAL IDENTIFY CHECKS, BETWEEN ALEPPO AND DAMASCUS THEY TRAVELED FREELY IN SYRIA AND DID NOT HAVE FEELING OF BEING FOLLOWED OR UNDER SURVEILLANCE. D) FROM THEIR COMMENTS TO US IT APPEARED THAT THEY BELIEVE THINGS ARE MOVING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. THEY EXPRESSED APPRECIATION FOR EMBASSY
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EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF COMMUNITY AND REPORTED THAT THESE EFFORTS WERE RECOGNIZED AND APPRECIATED WITHIN THE COMMUNITY. AT TIME OF THEIR DEPARTURE THEY WERE IN AGREEMENT WITH AMBASSADOR'S ANALYSIS THAT CLOSE COOPERATIVE EFFORT WAS REQUIRED BETWEEN DEPARTMENT OF STATE, SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN U.S., AND SYRIA, AND SARG TO BRING ABOUT DESIRED RESULTS.

9. DESPITE THIS AGREEMENT THEY UNDOUBTEDLY BELIEVE THERE IS MORE USG SHOULD DO TO ACCOMPLISH IMMEDIATE GOAL OF EMIGRATION OF 400 UNMARRIED SYRIAN JEWISH WOMEN AND LONG-

TERM GOAL OF EMIGRATION OF ENTIRE COMMUNITY. THEY BELIEVE
USG SHOULD BE MORE ACTIVE IN BRIDGING GAP BETWEEN
WHAT SARG HAS TOLD US AND WHAT SARG HAS TOLD COMMUNITY.
THEY EXPECT OUR INTERVENTION ON TEST CASES. IN ADDITION,
THEY TOLD TOUTAH (WHO RELAYED IT TO DCM) BUT NOT US, THAT
UPON RETURN TO U.S. THEY WOULD INTERVENE WITH
SOLARZ TO URGE PRESIDENT CARTER TO RAISE SUBJECT
DURING HIS FORTHCOMING MEETING WITH PRESIDENT ASAD.

10. OVERALL RESULTS AND IMPACT THEIR VISIT IN OUR JUDGMENT WAS
POSITIVE. OUR MAJOR REGRET IS THAT THEY DID NOT COM SOONER.
MURPHY

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